A Military Without Public Trust Cannot Keep a Nation Stable

I am Nigerian by law, and Biafran by heritage. For many people from the former Biafran region, these two realities can exist side by side: citizenship belongs to the Nigerian state, while history, ancestry, memory, and cultural identity remain deeply connected to Biafra and the Igbo experience.

That distinction matters when discussing the relationship between the Nigerian state, its security institutions, and the communities they are expected to protect.

For decades, questions of trust have surrounded the relationship between many people in the Southeast and Nigerian security institutions. Where communities believe that state institutions have failed to protect them, treated them unfairly, or dismissed their historical grievances, the presence of soldiers and law-enforcement personnel can become associated not with security, but with occupation and coercion.

Whether one agrees with that characterization or not, the perception itself is politically significant.

An Army Cannot Be Built on Force Alone

A military can possess weapons, uniforms, aircraft, tanks, intelligence networks, and enormous institutional power. But none of these automatically creates legitimacy.

Long-term national stability requires something more fundamental: **public trust**.

Citizens need to believe that their armed forces belong to the nation as a whole—not to a particular ethnic group, political faction, or ruling administration. They need to believe that soldiers will protect civilians regardless of their ethnicity, political beliefs, or region.

When citizens lose that confidence, the relationship between the state and the population changes.

The uniform may still command obedience, but obedience is not the same thing as legitimacy.

A government can compel people to comply with orders. It cannot compel them to genuinely trust the institution enforcing those orders.

The Question of Recruitment

This is why the question of military recruitment deserves serious discussion.

Why should young people from communities that feel alienated from the Nigerian security establishment be encouraged to join an institution they may perceive as hostile to their own communities?

At the same time, those who already serve in the armed forces should not automatically be regarded as enemies of their people. Many Igbo men and women have served, and continue to serve, in Nigeria's security institutions. Their individual motivations and loyalties should not be reduced to the actions of the state.

The deeper question is institutional:

> **“What would make a young person believe that joining the national military means serving the entire nation—including their own community—rather than serving a system they distrust?”**

That question cannot be answered with propaganda.

It requires accountability, equal treatment, transparency, and genuine political inclusion.

Trust Cannot Be Demanded

One of the fundamental mistakes governments can make is assuming that national unity can be created simply by demanding loyalty.

Trust does not work that way.

If citizens believe that security institutions lie to them, manipulate information, ignore abuses, or treat their communities differently, repeated government statements insisting that everything is fine will not solve the problem.

Trust is built through conduct.

When security forces operate transparently, protect civilians, investigate misconduct, punish abuses, and demonstrate that the law applies equally to everyone, confidence can gradually return.

When those things are absent, distrust becomes self-reinforcing.

Boycott as Civic Pressure

There is also a legitimate distinction between peaceful political resistance and violence.

If citizens decide not to pursue careers in a military institution because they believe that institution does not represent their interests or values, that can be understood as a form of peaceful civic pressure.

A boycott is fundamentally different from attacking soldiers or law-enforcement officers.

The objective should not be hatred of individuals. It should be a demand for institutional reform and accountability.

If a state wants citizens from every region and ethnic community to proudly serve in its military, then it must create an institution in which those citizens can see themselves represented, respected, and protected.

National Armies Need National Legitimacy

A truly national military cannot be sustained by recruiting people from different ethnic groups alone.

Representation is important, but representation without trust is insufficient.

A soldier from an Igbo background wearing a Nigerian uniform does not automatically resolve the deeper political and historical questions surrounding the relationship between the Igbo population and the Nigerian state.

National integration must exist beyond uniforms.

It must exist in equal citizenship, justice, political inclusion, institutional accountability, and the protection of human dignity.

The Real Test of National Unity

The real test of a nation is not whether its citizens can be forced to obey its institutions.

The real test is whether those citizens believe those institutions deserve their loyalty.

A military can maintain order for a period through superior force. But sustainable national stability requires something stronger than fear.

It requires legitimacy.

> **“A military without public trust is ultimately just an institution possessing armed power. A national army, by contrast, must be understood by the people as belonging to the nation and serving the people—not merely enforcing the authority of whoever controls the state.”**

If Nigeria genuinely wants lasting unity, then the question should not simply be, “How do we make our citizens support the military?”

> **“What must our institutions do to earn the trust of the citizens they are supposed to protect?”**

That is the foundation on which lasting national stability must be built.